
Prophecy. Sacrifice. Blessing.

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 22 December 2024

Micah 5:2-5a • Hebrews 10:5-10 • Luke 1:39-45



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Prophecy. Sacrifice. Blessings. Joyful obedience. Usually when I preach, I focus on one reading only, or maybe two, and as someone said to me the other day, it may leave some of you scratching your heads as to what the other readings mean, or have to do with what I'm talking about. So looking at all the readings today, we find prophecy in the Micah reading, sacrifice in the Hebrews reading, and blessings and joyful obedience in the Luke reading. Tying them all together is sometimes difficult to do, but today I might manage it in one sentence:

A woman in Bethlehem will accept the Lord's command and blessing (to the delight of her cousin) and give birth to a ruler of Israel, who by sacrificing himself, rather than bulls or sheep, will bring peace to the world and free us from our sins.

There. We can all go home now.

Or perhaps we'll unpack this a bit. Let's start with the reading from Hebrews. the Jews were used to the idea of temple sacrifices. We read in the early books of the Old Testament of the great numbers of animals — bulls, goats, sheep, birds — which were brought to the altar to be burned in a ritual which pleased God. God was pleased because the people were obeying his commands, and because they were giving up things which were valuable to them. God asked for the best examples of the livestock, those without flaw or blemish; and giving of your best showed your love and respect for your God. All things, including the animals, come from God, and in giving back the best, the people acknowledged the love and generosity of God, as well as his sovereignty over them. It was a complex system with many rules, and God was pleased with those who mastered the rules and did their best to obey every command.

But now Jesus comes along and says to God, “You neither want nor are you pleased with sacrifices and offerings or with animals burned on the altar and the sacrifices to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:8). The time for animal sacrifices is over. But God still demands sacrifice. What else could be sacrificed? Surely God does not desire human sacrifice? No, God has declared that to be a detestable practice, found among those who do not recognise God's sovereignty. No, the only acceptable sacrifice is provided by God: a man — God's Son — will be brought into the world, live for a few years to teach his disciples about God, and then sent to death. “God does away with all the old sacrifices and puts the sacrifice of Christ in their place” (10:9).

But wait. This same Son, this Jesus, is to be the Messiah, the one who comes out of lowly Bethlehem, one of the smallest towns in Judah, to be the ruler for Israel. He will be the one who will bring Israel out of her bondage. “When he comes, he will rule his people with the strength that comes from the Lord and with the majesty of the Lord God himself” (Micah 5:4). He will come to rule his people, and they are indeed his people, for they were created through him. He does this in obedience to his Father.

There is thus a beautiful symmetry between Jesus and his mother Mary. Both have said “yes” to God: Mary in accepting that she will bear God's Son, and Jesus in accepting the great yet terrible task of sacrificing himself. And Mary is visiting Elizabeth, who recognises the great thing Mary has done in accepting God's will. “You are the most blessed of all women,” she tells Mary (Luke 1:42). And it is true. We do not pray to Mary, as those of the Roman Catholic faith do; but we certainly admire her, and she is a wonderful model for our own faith. If there is one thing we learn from the example of Mary, it is to be open to God. I believe that God will visit and communicate with those who keep themselves open spiritually, through prayer.

We are not told much detail about Mary or her life before she became betrothed to Joseph; but she must have always had a strong faith and a desire for spiritual

intimacy with God, so that when the angel Gabriel came to her, he found her welcoming and willing to do as God willed. And God sometimes asks hard things of us. Childbirth is not easy, particularly in that time, and for poor women with few resources. Mary said yes to the angel, and yes to God, even though she knew she might be in for a very difficult time. That may also be considered a sacrifice: Mary sublimated her own desires to God's will. She responded humbly to Gabriel, not counting the cost to herself. That speaks of a great trust and faith, which is what Elizabeth responded to.

In sending his Son to us, God entered the world and the course of human life in a unique way. God had entered human history in the past: walking in the garden with Adam and Eve, wrestling with Jacob in the wilderness. But God as Jesus becoming a man and living on the earth for 30 years or so is unique, and Jesus' death and resurrection changed everything. Now we relate to God in a new way: through his Son as our intercessor. Everything associated with this, all the elements of the story, were unprecedented: the virgin birth, the relationship to John the Baptist who prepared the way, the teaching of Jesus, the abolition of animal sacrifice. It is all new. God was doing a new thing, and is still doing so today, in calling his people to follow his Son.

So today we have a prophecy that came true: Micah's about our Saviour coming from Bethlehem. We have the sacrifice of Jesus, and the lesser one of Mary. We have the blessing of God upon all his children. And we have Mary's joyful obedience. And what is our response to all this?

Thanks be to God! Amen.